

## Violence at School

Recent shootings at schools have raised public concern about school safety, but studies have confirmed that schools nationwide are relatively safe. Schools have fewer homicides and nonfatal injuries than homes and neighborhoods. In fact, the National Crime Victimization Survey found in 1998 that the rate of serious violent crimes against youths age 12-18 was one-half as great when they were at school as when they were not.

## Tips for Talking with Children about School Violence

The Mental Health America offers these suggestions:

- Encourage children to talk about their concerns and to express their feelings. Some children won't bring up the subject themselves, so you might prompt them by asking if they feel safe at school.
- Validate children's feelings. Do not minimize their concerns, but do let them know that serious school violence is not common, which is why incidents such as Columbine attract media attention. Stress that schools are safe places. In fact, recent studies have shown that schools are safer now than ever before.
- Talk honestly about your feelings regarding school violence. It is important for children to recognize that they are not the only ones with fears.
- Discuss the safety procedures that are in place at your children's school. Explain why visitors must sign in at the principal's office. Help children understand that such measures exist for their safety and stress the importance of obeying school rules and policies. (It may be helpful to contact your children's school to learn its safety procedures and policies.)
- Encourage children to take action regarding school safety. Tell them to report specific incidents, such as bullying, threats, or talk of suicide, and to develop problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. Encourage older children to participate in student-run antiviolence programs.
- Create safety plans with your children. Help identify which adults your children can talk with if they feel threatened at school. Also make sure that your children know how to reach you or another family member or friend in case of emergency at school. Remind your children that they can talk to you anytime they feel threatened.
- Recognize behavior that indicates your children are

concerned about going to school. Younger children may express their fears and anxiety by not wanting to attend school or participate in school-based activities. Teens and adolescents may become argumentative, withdrawn, or allow their school performance to decline.

- Keep communication open, making school safety a common topic in family discussions, rather than just a response to difficulties or problems. Openness will encourage children to share their concerns.

## Recognizing Violence in Others

Warning signs which indicate violence is a serious immediate possibility:

- loss of temper on a daily basis
- frequent physical fighting
- significant vandalism or damage of property
- increase in use of drugs or alcohol
- increase in risk-taking behavior
- detailed plans to commit acts of violence
- threats or plans to hurt others
- pleasure from hurting animals
- possession of a weapon

Warning signs which indicate a potential for violence:

- a history of violent or aggressive behavior
- serious drug or alcohol use
- gang membership or strong desire to join a gang
- access to or fascination with weapons, especially guns
- threatening others regularly
- trouble controlling aggressive feelings, anger
- withdrawal from friends and usual activities
- having been a victim of bullying
- poor school performance
- history of discipline problems or frequent run-ins with authority
- talking of feeling disrespected, rejected or alone
- failing to acknowledge the feelings or rights of others

If your children know someone at school who has these warning signs, advise them, above all, to be safe. Tell them not to be alone with people who show warning signs. They should tell someone they trust and respect about their concerns and ask for help. This could be a family member, guidance counselor, teacher, school psychologist, coach, clergy, school resource officer, or friend. If they are worried about being a victim of violence, they should ask someone in authority to protect

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them. They should not become violent or use a weapon for protection.

The key to preventing violent behavior is asking an experienced professional for help. The most important thing to remember is that no one has to “go it alone”.

## Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters

Children who have witnessed violence in their families, schools, or communities are vulnerable to serious long-term problems. Their emotional reactions, including fear, depression, withdrawal or anger, can occur immediately, days or even weeks after the trauma or tragic event. Youngsters who have experienced such an event often need support from parents and teachers to avoid long-term emotional damage. Most will recover in a short time, but the minority, who develop Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) or other persistent problems, need treatment.

Immediately helping children and adolescents who have suffered trauma from violence or a disaster is critical. After violence or a disaster occurs, the family is the first-line resource for helping. Among the things that parents and other caring adults can do are:

- Explain the episode of violence or disaster as well as you are able.
- Encourage children to express their feelings, listen without passing judgment. Help younger children find words to express their feelings. Do not force discussion of the traumatic event.
- Let children and adolescents know that it is normal to feel upset after something bad happens.
- Allow time for the youngsters to experience and talk about their feelings.
- If your children are fearful, make sure they know you love them and will take care of them. Stay together as a family as much as possible.
- If behavior at bedtime is a problem, give children extra time and reassurance. If necessary, let them sleep with a light on or in your room for a limited time.
- Let children and adolescents know that the traumatic event was not their fault.
- Do not criticize regressive behavior (returning to behaviors from earlier ages) such as thumb sucking, bed-wetting, and fear of the dark, or shame the child with words like “babyish.”
- Allow children to cry or be sad. Don’t expect them to be brave or tough.
- Encourage children and adolescents to feel in control. Let them make some decisions about meals, what to wear, etc. A return to routine can be reassuring to the child.
- Take care of yourself so you can take care of the children.

Some children and adolescents will have problems for some time after a traumatic event. Chronic conditions such as depression or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may develop, requiring treatment.

PTSD is diagnosed when the following symptoms have been present for longer than one month:

- Reexperiencing the event through play or in trauma-

specific nightmares or flashbacks, or distress over events that are similar to the trauma.

- Avoiding reminders of the event or a general lack of responsiveness (e.g., diminished interests or feeling there is no future).
- Increased difficulties with sleeping, irritability, poor concentration, startle reaction and regression.

PTSD may resolve without treatment, but some form of therapy with a mental health professional is necessary to heal.

Recent research findings show that counseling children very soon after a traumatic event may reduce some of the symptoms of PTSD.

In addition, parents’ reactions to a violent event or disaster strongly influence their children’s ability to recover; this is particularly true for mothers of young children. If the mother is depressed or highly anxious, she may need to get emotional support or counseling so that she can help her child.

## Tips on Managing Conflict

- Learn to understand your own feelings about conflict and recognize your “triggers,” words or actions that make you have an emotional response such as anger. Once you know your “triggers” —such as a facial expression, tone of voice, pointing finger, certain phrase— you can better control your emotions. If your style of dealing with conflict isn’t working and you feel raging emotions that lead to more problems, try to change.
- Express yourself calmly. Express criticism, anger, disappointment, or displeasure without losing your temper. Ask yourself if your response is safe and reasonable.
- Listen to others carefully and respond without getting upset when someone gives you negative feedback. Ask yourself if you can really see the other person’s point of view.
- Negotiate — Explain your needs and define the problem. Talk about the issues without insulting or blaming the other person. Work out your problems with someone else by looking at different solutions and compromises. Make it your goal to defeat the problem, not the person.
- Learn to talk about your feelings. If you’re afraid to talk or can’t find the right words to describe what you’re going through, find a trusted friend or professional to help you.

*Sources:*

*National Institute of Mental Health*

*Mental Health America*

*American Psychological Association*

*Consumer Information Center*

*Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General, 2001*